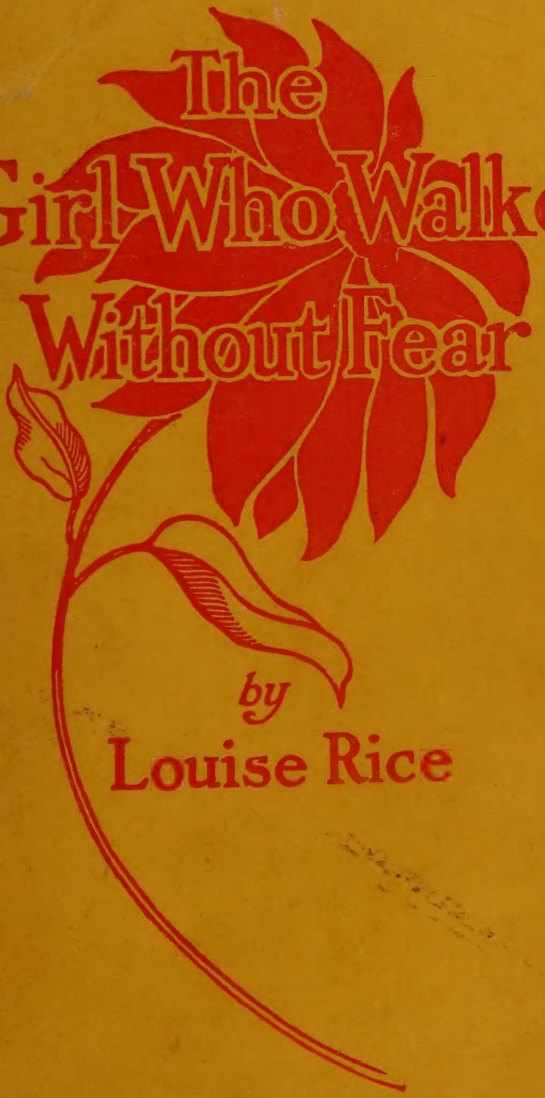
THE COMRADE SERIES

The Girl Who Walked Without Fear



by

Louise Rice

EIGHTH EDITION

(Price 60c)

This book was a prize for something I wrote long, long long ago! But I like the story and want you to have it and enjoy it, too! Please read it aloud to Elizabeth. It is a Christmas story.

Much love & happiness on your birthday. Enjoy!

Love

Grandma (& Grandpa, too!)

Jadeborg

10-13-'95

THE GIRL WHO WALKED WITHOUT FEAR

WORKS BY LOUISE RICE

NEW BLOOD
A STORY OF THE MELTING POT

THE GIRL WHO WALKED WITHOUT FEAR
A TALE OF CHRISTMAS EVE

The Girl Who Walked Without Fear

BY

LOUISE RICE

NEW YORK CHICAGO TORONTO
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"The Peace of the Lord be with you."

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I

BILL BARTON'S BEWILDERMENT

I

BILL BARTON'S BEWILDERMENT

IT was a regular, old-fashioned Christmas Eve. Everybody said so; the kind you see on picture postcards, with the regular muffled figures hurrying along with the regular Christmas Eve packages, and the regular wreaths in the windows, and the regular icicles hanging from windows and doors, and the regular snow piled everywhere and whirling in soft eddies far up, across the tops of the tallest buildings.

The snow lay all over the big city, smothering its ugly sounds, smoothing its

ugly sights. Snow blurred the street lights that were struggling out in the dusk, and surrounded the big electric advertisements, mysteriously pendant in the upper air, with a soft nebula of starry rays. Snow picked out the squarest, most uncompromising of the great piles of stone in lines of fairy beauty. Snow made the cheeks of the women with exotic flowers pinned on their furs burn as if a lover had kissed them; snow made the boys joyously kick it up with their feet; snow sifted down the coat collars and chilled the marrow in the bones of men who gazed hungrily out from the shelter of doorways, and the poor refuge of cellars; snow sparkled everywhere, in the air and on the earth, as if some one had that moment tinselled the world.

All sorts of people, at that precise moment of twilight, were looking out on that

regular, old-fashioned Christmas Eve; a daintily clad woman stepping into a street car, a man shivering on a street corner, O'Connor, the policeman, a girl looking out from the upper floor of a department store, a newsboy shouting his wares, and a handsome young man, wearily trying to be amused in one of New York's show eating places. One and all, they were bound together, though some of them were never to see another of that odd company, to whom Christmas Eve was bringing a crucial moment, one and all, they could never, in their most fantastic dreams, have imagined the dainty little figure, which, in the hand of The Great Weaver, was to change the drab patterns of their lives. For The Weaver's designs are not ours, and His instruments are often strange to our sight, and the golden thread is spun when we least expect it.

She wore the dress of a Chinese girl of the better class. A soft, silken coat of dark blue fell almost to her feet, and rich embroideries, in light blue and black, bordered it. Beneath, a plain, straight skirt touched embroidered shoes with thick, white soles and turned up toes. Her dark, abundant hair was parted and brought down over her ears and an embroidered silken band held it in place.

Standing at the door she glanced back, a dimple hinting in her round cheek, and then, swaying a little with each short step, her tiny hands muffled in her long sleeves, she stepped into the snow, confidant and smiling, indescribably sweet and modest and alien among the furred and hatted throng.

Cosmopolitan New York is not easily startled, therefore it bestowed no more than an instant's pause upon the unusual

figure, slipping a bit on the unaccustomed snow, its dark head, with the gleaming band, lightly powdered with the falling crystals.

On the corner toward which she went, Bill Barton lounged over a friendly grating, from which a gust of warm air occasionally came. Bill did not particularly care for the snow, nor for the festoons of green in the shop windows, nor for the smiling faces that hurried past him. Truth to tell, there wasn't a thing in the world which Bill could have specified at that moment that he did particularly care for. When your pockets are empty of everything but your fingers, and your shoes leak, and you have no overcoat or family or friends or health and it is all your own fault, you are not likely to care very much what your eyes rest on. And when you have no roof under which to

lay your head, and no work or prospect of any, and you can't remember when you last had a real meal, the most regular Christmas Eve that ever was will not help you.

Bill shifted one foot and then the other, slowly and heavily, like a clumsy bear, as they alternately grew numb with his weight. He saw the street and the people, insofar as he could be said to see anything at all, but that to which he was really attending was the dull wash of water below the timbers of a pier, where the river, sullen and angry, all choppy with ice, slapped viciously against its banks and muttered that there a man might surely lie and forget that life had been, for him, a ghastly joke.

Across the street from Bill, traffic policeman O'Connor, pink, clean, aggressively trim, most severely buttoned as to

his collar and shiny as to his boots, with a smile as winning and an eye as blue as ever even an Irishman owned, walked the usual ten feet to and from his blanketed horse, keeping a calmly efficient guard upon the snarl of vehicles at the corner, and on the crowds on the crossing, where a swarm of people scurried whenever he held up his gauntletted hand.

Bill hated that policeman a little more than he hated even himself. He hated him for his strong, healthy body, and for the money that must jingle in his pockets, and for the warm coat he wore, and for his air of good natured authority, but most of all, he hated him for his smile. He knew that it was only a question of time when O'Connor would saunter over and with just that unvarying smile would say:

"Move on, now, you!"

Finding hate fairly effective as a stimulant, Bill encouraged it, glaring with his red rimmed eyes at the soldierly figure, while he continued to shift his feet and hunch his shoulders down into his ragged coat.

The hurrying mob was growing thicker, and the Salvation Army Santa Claus beside the red brick chimney which seemed to grow up out of the sidewalk, as from a vast roof below, rang his alms-begging bell with frantic persistency. The windows of the great office buildings lit, one after another, until they seemed to be strung with long lines of winking lanterns. The cars that inched themselves along among the hordes of black specks which were people, were shrouded with mist from within and with snow from without, so that they seemed like monstrous glow-

worms crawling among the restless heaps of ants.

O'Connor held up his hand again and the cars and trucks and wagons and taxi-cabs and carriages piled themselves into apparently inextricable confusion as a flood of humanity poured between their banks. With it, approaching Bill, there came a figure so impossible that it focused even his wandering glance and sent a thrill of pure fear down his back.

"Gee!" said Bill, to himself, "I'm see-in' things, that's what. I need a meal bad," he added, uneasily, "an' if I don't meet up with some vittels soon the nutty bell'll ring in Bellevue, I'm thinkin'."

Her swaying, undulating walk made her seem to float, and a gust of snow, sweeping across her just then, seemed to melt her away into thin air, leaving only

her dark, strange face peering through it. Bill shut his eyes.

"Yep, you're slippin'," he told himself, "Le's see, was it yesterday or the day before I had that cawfee?"

It had really been so long since he had eaten that his senses were preternaturally acute, so that presently he was conscious of some faint, exotic fragrance that was very unlike the rank perfumes with which he had occasionally had acquaintance. He opened his eyes and saw that the figure which he had thought a figment of his starved stomach was standing beside him. Slowly, he readjusted his attitude. This was no terrifying evidence of approaching dissolution, but just a Chink girl. However, he looked at her closely, for he had never seen a Chinese woman before. She had evidently stepped out of the crowd for a moment to look about

her with greater ease. Her strange, slanting eyes were alight with such palpable interest and excitement that more than one man or woman smiled as they caught a glimpse of her. Some slight movement of Bill's drew her attention to him, and she spoke, at once, in a purer English than he had often heard.

"Is it not wonderful, sir, all this concourse of people? Never have I seen so many—not in all my life—not even in Hong Kong."

The last words were given a different inflection from that of their Anglicized pronunciation, but otherwise there was only the faintest trace of an accent to her speech.

Bill hardly knew what it was that she had said. He was still looking curiously at her.

"Uh-huh!" he grunted.

"I had to come out and see it," the girl continued, "I had to! I could not remain within doors, when I remembered that my feet were at last on the earth of this land —and on Christmas Eve. For that is the most joyous time in the year, sir, is it not?"

Bill searched his vocabulary and found it wanting. A long time ago he would have known how to reply, but now it was difficult. "You bet," he finally got out, with an effort.

The girl smiled sweetly. "There is something so marvellous in this land of the Flowery Flag. That is what we call your land, sir, in China. Life here must be so beautiful, free from foolish superstitions and from all fear. And to think that each one here—all these who are passing so happily along, with the em-

blems of the glad day about them everywhere—that they are all Christians—Oh, that is mos' wonderful of all."

"Christians!" Bill exploded. "Christians! Well, say, guess again!"

She did not comprehend the idiom, but she understood the tone. "Perhaps not as perfect Christians as they could wish, sir; none of us is that."

"I just guess not!"

"But if we persevere we shall all attain something, at least, of holiness."

Bill made a stiff step nearer and looked down at her with curiosity. It had dawned upon him that he was holding a very odd conversation, indeed.

"Say," he said, "Say, you talk kinda—what's your lay, anyhow?"

" 'Lay'? I do not understand you, sir."

"What d'you mean, standin' talkin' to a fella like this?"

A lovely salmon pink spread delicately over the high cheek bones. "Oh—should I not do so? In this Christian land surely one may speak without fear to any man, even though one be a woman. In my unhappy country women must walk in fear, with the eyes cast down, but you Christian men are the brothers of all women—is it not so?"

"Say, can you beat that?" Bill enquired of the arc light above him. "You must be a little off," he suggested, bringing his eyes down to her.

" 'Off'?"

"Yeh. What d' you mean with all that talk about—about brothers—an' Christians—an' all that?"

She fell back a little from him and smiled, as one who answers a gentle pleasantry. "Why, are you not a Christian, sir?"

Bill dropped his eyes at that, looking down at his leaking shoes, his hands thrust far down in his pockets. He did not answer, and after a second's hesitation, the girl moved away, as she said:

"The peace of the Lord be with you."

Bill remained motionless, looking at the spot where she had stood. Memory, suddenly opened a long shut and barred door, had thrown him into a trance, in which he neither saw nor heard anything of the present. With the girl's last words a slow and solemn chime of bells had rung, and out of the snow, the trampled, dirty snow on the sidewalk, there arose a village with a church spire glittering among wintry trees and rows of white houses with green shutters set in snowy yards. Who was it that had asked that question about being a Christian—so long ago? Long ago, before the river, sullen and

angry, called for a man? Why, it was the old minister, of course, the stooped old man with the thin grey hair and the long black coat that was always shiny at the seams. William Barton had laughed disrespectfully — that lusty, pleasure-loving young William, who wanted the best of the world, and who was so tired of the village and the church among the trees and the old minister; who hated living with his mother and sisters in the little house near the school. Yes, he had laughed. And then, one day near Christmas, what had he done? Why, he took a train for New York, and he had never written his mother a word in all the miserable years since then.

"*Are-you-not-a-Christian?*" tolled the bells.

"God help me!" Bill said, aloud. A long time after, it seemed to him, the bells

stopped, and he lifted his eyes and slowly struggled back to the knowledge of where he was, and that the bells which had asked that pertinent question had rung for vespers in the church on the next block. People were going in there now, people with mothers who had not been broken hearted—died, perhaps—because an only son never came; people who had not black memories of sin and waste and shame, people who were not going down to death, starving and beaten and wrecked, knowing, at last, just the one great desire—to go home, only to go home.

Traffic Policeman O'Connor, with his eyes everywhere, as a policeman's should be, saw Bill lurch heavily and drew the customary conclusion. He came leisurely across the crowded street, his horse's bridle over his arm.

"Move on, now, you!" he admonished,

with precisely the smile and the mendatory gesture which Bill had anticipated.

He expected the man to slouch away with a muttered curse, but instead of that, he stumbled nearer to the curb and looked at O'Connor doggedly, almost defiantly.

"Aw, say—could you—I—" his voice was thick and uncertain. "Say, you don't know where a fella could get a job, d'you?"

"What kind of a job?"

"Anything. Except—I won't work in a saloon."

Astonishment proclaimed itself in the Irishman's expressive face. "Well, I'll be blest!" he ejaculated.

Bill moved closer and laid a hand on the horse's flanks to steady himself. "Say," he demanded, "are you a Christian?"

O'Connor turned a beautiful pink. "Aw course Oi am!" he sputtered.

"Well, I'm not, but maybe—Say, did you see that little Chink girl that was here a minute ago? Where'd she get to, anyway? She asked me that. She—old man Talbot used to ask me that, years ago. Ain't that funny? I mean—a Chink girl like that askin'—Gee, if everybody was Christians, the peace of the Lord—I don't know what I'm talking about."

O'Connor's astonishment had grown, but he ran a practiced eye over Bill's big frame and sunken cheeks. "Man, you're sick," he stated.

"No, I ain't. At least, I wouldn't be if I could get somepin' to eat. I ain't had anything since that cawfee—but say, honest, what's botherin' me is what that Chink girl asked me, that's all. Maybe

—" he gave the ghost of a laugh—"maybe I'm gettin' converted. That's what they used to call it, when a fella got all broke up like this—back home."

"Its midical attinshen ye nade," O'Connor replied, whose tongue, as he said himself, "always shlipped a bit" when he was excited. "Sure, yer fit fer no job till yer betther. Here, take this car-r-d over t' Sister Agatha, at th' house o' Mercy on Twelt' street." He laid a reassuring hand on Bill's shoulders. "Ye tell 'er O'Connor sint ye, an' he'll be along t'night t' see about ye. Gwan with ye, now. Sure, 'tis only two blocks. Aw, that's a'right!"

"A Christian is ut?" said the policeman to himself, as Bill turned his transfigured face toward succour, and he put his hand into an inside pocket and took out a long brown envelope which rustled

stiffly as he rolled it thoughtfully between his thumb and finger. "A Christian are ye, Tim O'Connor, wid that dir-rty money in yer hands? Faith, Kelly will have t' get his license on his own ugly mug—I'll have naught t' do wid ut!"

II

LITTLE BROTHER

II

LITTLE BROTHER

MEANWHILE, the Chinese girl walked on through the crowded street, looking into shop windows, and often stopping, so that it was quite dark when she stopped on a corner and spoke to a newsboy. "Will you have the kindness to tell me, little brother, how I shall go to find a—a departmental shop?"

The boy shifted his papers and stared. "A—A what?" he queried, and then, as her meaning came to him, he grinned, "Oh—oh sure. Youse take the Sixt Avenoo car, an' youse'll pass a bunch of 'em. Say, do youse know how t' travel around dis burg?"

"To some extent, though not thoroughly. I secured some in-for-mation of the domestic where I am stopping, but if I do not remember, or become confused, some one will always direct me. In this Christian land I do not fear to question anyone."

The old eyes in the boy face narrowed with frank impudence. He went through the pantomime of knocking on his own head, listening for some response and then sadly shaking the crisp curls under the wisp of a cap. "Nobody home," he stated succinctly, thus giving it as his opinion that the girl was a little mad. Naturally, she understood nothing of the imputation, but she had the uncanny intuitiveness of the Orient, and she bent a strange look on the boy from her heavy-lidded eyes. " 'The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord,' " she quoted.

"We of China think that the young should speak and act always with reverence for their elders. I do not understand your allusion, but I fear that your honourable mother would not approve of it."

The boy was cowed by something in her manner, a something which was the cold inscrutability of her race, but he made a valiant effort to maintain his usual assurance.

"Say, where'd youse escape from, you Movie Queen?" he demanded.

The girl looked at him in surprise. "It is true that I have run away from my good friends, but only for a little while. It is just to see the lovely Christmas Eve in this Christian land that I have come out. And also to feel closer to all these Christians as they pass along those streets."

The boy whistled derisively. "Youse is sure strong on dat Christian dope."

Again she read his face instead of his words, and sadness fell on her own. She put the tips of her slender fingers on his shoulders and looked down, pityingly.

"Why, my little brother—are you not a Christian?"

The boy eyed her, ready to give his derisive whistle again, but her face was very sweet and gentle, and there was the shadow of a resemblance on it to his own "honourable mother" too recently lost to be forgotten or thought of without a pang that made a little boy feel very, very dreadful, when you consider how really little he was.

"I dunno," he muttered, at last, wriggling his feet uneasily, and squirming away from the girl's hand, "Say, here's

th' car. Youse tell th' conductor t' let youse off at Toidy-toid street—see?"

Then Michael Scerbo, Italian by birth, American by adoption, and an orphan by bitter misfortune, returned to the corner, sold six papers, jostled an enterprising new boy off of his particular spot, blew on his fingers, and said:

"Dio mio!—dat goil was O. K."

Which linguistic hybridism needs explanation. That night Father Danelli, of the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows, heard the confession of a small boy who had not performed that rite for some time. It was all mixed up with "a little Chink goil" which proved difficult for the good father to understand, but it was a satisfactory confession, nevertheless, and Michael Scerbo whistled happily through his teeth as he crossed himself by the holy-water font.

III

WHAT WOMEN UNDERSTAND

III

WHAT WOMEN UNDERSTAND

SIXTH AVENUE cars are always apt to contain a rare assortment of humanity, so that the entrance into one, already overcrowded, on the regular Christmas Eve, of a small Chinese girl, of modest demeanour, made almost no impression. She tiptoed to reach a strap, and then smiled around upon the people who were packed in so close to her. The car swayed and jerked, almost throwing her from her small feet, but she held on valiantly, laughing a little when she was thrown from one side to the other. Gradually, the press around her thickened until

it became impossible to see anything but the seat before her, and so she began to look attentively at the people who sat there.

One was a lady, really a lady in the best sense of the word, so far as fine simplicity and immaculateness can prove that intangible quality. She might have been beautiful, had there not been a hard contraction of her lips and a set, frozen frown in her brilliant eyes. She ostentatiously looked away from her seat mate, a fat, beaming German woman, with two fat, beaming youngsters on her knee, who squirmed and wriggled with superabundant vitality. When they kicked their plump legs the lady drew her skirts away, and when they prattled the loudest, she closed her eyes and the line between her eyes deepened.

The Chinese girl reached down and

patted the head of the smallest. "The babies—they are always so sweet," she said to the mother, who broke into a happy mixture of English and German at this attention to her darlings from a strange *Mädchen* whom she had been stealthily admiring for some time.

The girl smiled and shook her head. "I know not the German, madame," she said. The children, pleased with the colours on the silk coat, leaned boldly across the immaculate lady to clutch at it, and the girl's smile grew, as she encouraged the chubby fingers to trace the pattern of the silk flowers. Then she looked toward the mother, proudly watching. "The babies, though, madame, they speak a language all women can understand. Is it not so?" she queried. The German woman only nodded vaguely, for she knew almost no English, and so the

girl's quick eyes instantly transferred the question to the lady, whose glance, darkened with sudden pain, had been lifted with swift interest. The lady's dress was of the latest cut, and her hat was a marvel of the milliner's art, and prosperity showed in every line of her well-nourished figure, but her eyes were so eloquent of what she suffered that the girl answered, as if she had spoken.

"The little ones are the core of our hearts—is it not so, madame? The pretty, innocent ones," and with a gesture infinitely gentle and appealing she put the fat hand of the youngest child on the beautiful white glove of the lady, who let it lie there for a moment before she took it, held it and crushed it so that the baby drew back in alarm.

"You are right, my child," she said, bitterly, "all women understand the lan-

guage of children, but sometimes that knowledge is bitter."

Blue eyes, Occidental to the last curve of their pale lashes, looked up into black eyes, Oriental to every fold of their chiselled lids. The German woman looked up, too, and the children, feeling some strong feeling passing in the air, were silent and still. The black eyes deepened and glowed. It was as if a light from far behind them came steadily nearer. "I understand, dear madame," she murmured, bending low, her eyes on the fine crêpe with which the lady's gown was trimmed, "I understand, although I have not yet had either that great happiness, or that deep grief, but in a Christian land, to lose is so different. In my unhappy country it is hard for even Christians to bear the loss of their dears, for all around us is unbelief, but here—here

all have the hope, the Resurrection hope, when the dead in Christ shall rise. Little children first of all, I like to think."

The blue eyes filled with tears, and the bright head drooped. Those were signs that the German woman could well understand. "Du lieber Gott!" she exclaimed, and kissed her two children.

When the two women looked up, a moment afterward, the swaying, silken coat was gone. The fat baby, feeling that one object of interest had disappeared, determined to attach himself to the one left. He therefore leaned over his mother's arm and gurgled his most wooing tones into the lovely face; and after a moment, hungry arms swept him over to sit in state on a velvet cloak, and to be shown the wonders of a small watch, and the fascinating contents of a gold mesh bag. Occasionally he looked up in

surprise, as he felt something wet splash on his downy neck, but when he saw the lovely lady's face, he could think of nothing else, for it had in it a quality, new-found, which would evermore draw all children.

IV

SISTERS ALL

IV

SISTERS ALL

ON the second floor of a big department store, Miss Jennie MacAllister powdered her nose, ruffled up the frill of her blouse and sighed. She was pale, and a grim line lay around the gallant smile on her lips. Like its competitors, the store kept open until nine o'clock on the five nights preceding Christmas Eve, and on that night it closed only when the customers stopped coming and that was usually midnight.

Miss MacAllister came of Scotch ancestry. It showed in the reddish gold of her hair, and in the strength of her spare but graceful frame. Her assistant at the

celluloid novelty counter was Yetta Zabriskie, strong and lean, too, but with dark, crinkled, abundant hair and a piquant little face, like a dark pansy.

"Yes, sir," Yetta was repeating, for the fourth time, "these brush and comb sets is imported. They are the genuwine article. An' the manicure set that matches is imported, too. The two sets at one ninety eight is a bargain, sir. You couldn't do better."

"Don't push 'im," Miss MacAllister admonished, adroitly swooping near Yetta's ear in a casual manner, "Give the pore boob time. Yes, ma'm, those hairpin holders are very special. Our regular one dollar stock, reduced to seventy-nine cents."

"Here, c-a-s-h," both girls shrilled.

"Gee, but I'm tired," Miss MacAllister confided to her mate, as there came a lull

in celluloid. "I whist they'd take Christmas off th' calender. Seems like the whole holiday season was just got up so's to make more'n half th' people in the world work themselves almost to death. We get our supper money and a dollar extry for th' week, and then we spend six weeks gettin' over that dollar's worth. No, ma'm, we have no more of the celluloid umbrella handles at one nineteen, but perhaps you would like to see—Oh, you wouldn't? Well, I'm really very sorry, I'm sure. Gee, Yetta, the way people get peeved, you'd think we et up th' stock just so's they couldn't get what they want."

"You're awful tired, Jennie," Yetta replied. "Sit down for a minute. O'Hagan ain't around. Besides, he wouldn't say anything; he's kinda sweet on you, ain't he?"

"Huh! He keeps it mighty close, if he is," Miss MacAllister replied.

"Well, rest a little. Christmas will be here tomorrow and you will feel better."

"Christmas! Yah! It makes me sick. All the merry Christmas I get is sore feet and a back that's broke. Right before stock takin', too, and after that there's th' January White sales comin' along. I suppose it'll be just my luck t' get put on the mob counters on th' main floor."

"But you will enjoy tomorrow, Jennie."

"Oh, will I—will I?" Well, I just guess not! I'll be in bed tryin' t' feel as if I was a human bein' again, and my landlady'll be hollerin' because I got the gas stove lit. If it wasn't for this blamed old store keepin' open tonight I'd have bin off to a swell dance with that fella I bin tellin' you about. It wouldn't do me

much good t' go, though. I can't stand dancin' more'n one or two numbers."

"You should oughta take care of yourself, Jennie. My mother makes me and my sister drink hot soup every night when we get home late like this."

"Yeh—well, you're lucky, you are. I gotta live in a room the size of a peanut, an' if I gotta cracker in my drawer I hand myself a swell lunch, an' I ain't had a mother since I was fourteen."

"It's awful when a girl ain't gotta mother."

"Yeh."

"I whist I could get a better job, Jennie, but I don't know nothing else. It is hard to work like this."

"Now you're talkin'. Gee, Yetta, sometimes I think I'll cut it all out. Sometimes I just think I'll do somethin' desperate. That fella I bin tellin' you

about—you know I bin going with him for two months now, an' he—he's a swell guy, y' know, an' he has lots of coin, an' he—oh, I dunno, sometimes I think—"

"It is better to let fellas alone, my mother says, unless—"

"Yeh—Well, you've gotta a mother an' a home. I ain't got anybody, an' I'm tired, an' I ain't gettin' any younger. I tell you, Yetta—"

Some one was coming down the almost deserted aisle, smiling a little as she paused irresolutely at an occasional counter. Her arms were full of small parcels.

"Gee, Yetta," Miss MacAllister exclaimed, "look at what's comin'."

"It is a China woman, ain't it? I have never seen one before."

"I seen one, onct, down in Chinatown, but I only got a squint at her. Ain't she a sweet looker, though?"

The little lady came on, watched by all the salespeople within sight of her with great interest. Each one, as she looked at their wares, strove to make a sale, but with a courteous little bend of her sleek head she passed each one by, until she reached the celluloid counter.

"These are very pretty," she remarked, after an inspection of the counter, "what is the price of this brush?"

"One forty-nine!" both girls replied, leaning eagerly forward, their eyes travelling in fascination all over the strange clothes and the oddly pretty face.

"The bristles are good, I think? I will take it, thank you. And this little box?"

Business instincts awoke Miss MacAllister from the lethergy of amazement. "That's a swell little box," she declared, there's a pincushion in the top and two

sections inside—see? It's made in Germany. Most of the real cut celluloid articles are made there. It's eighty-seven cents, marked down from one twenty-five."

The slim brown fingers touched the box delicately, following Miss MacAllister's freckled hand. "I think I will take that, too," she stated, "and perhaps one or two of these little things. They are handkerchief holders, are they not? I am buying some Christmas presents for those I love, and one wants something very pretty, indeed, for that, does one not?"

"You sure do," Miss MacAllister replied, without much understanding of what she was replying to, for the black eyes were smiling into hers with so much candour and trust that she had a curious sensation of gently sinking into their limpid depths.

"This is my first Christmas in your country," she went on, as she waited for her change, "indeed, it is almost my first day here, for I do not count that swift journey since we left the boat."

"Did you just come over from China?"

"Yes. We came by way of San Francisco, but we did not stop there, at all. We took the train, at once."

"Oh, that's some journey."

"I never thought one could ride continuously on a train for so many days, but it was very in-ter-esting."

"How'd you learn t' speak English so good?"

"I have spoken it since I was a small child, when I went to live in the Mission in Hong Kong. Now some of us girls are sent over here to complete our education. I am to be a doctor."

"My, ain't that grand! Here's your

change. Four sixty-three, sixty-five, seventy-five an' twenty-five's five dollars. Thank you. Are the rest o' your party in the store?"

"No, I am alone. Our good friends, in whose charge we are, promised us that we should go out tomorrow, but I—" she showed her little pearls of teeth in a mischievous smile, "I was most naughty and ran away by myself to see the Christmas Eve, and to obtain these sur-prises. I am always going away, in a hurry, because I and so impatient. My friends are meeting old acquaintances tonight and they will not miss me, nor will my girl companions tell of my escapade until I return."

"Mean t' say you just landed in Noo York, an' you got th' nerve to go walkin' around by yourself at this hour of th' night?"

" But there is nothing to fear in a Chris-

tian land like your America. Even in China, when a girl meets a Christian she at once feels mos' safe." Yetta and Miss MacAllister moved uneasily, staring alternately at each other and at the Chinese girl—"so that of course I do not fear," she ended, sweetly, "but I have been gone a long time, I think, and now I must go home at once. My friends may not know how strong is my understanding of this country."

Miss MacAllister laid a tentative hand on the silk sleeve. "Say, you're a funny one, you are," she said.

"Funny? I amuse you?"

"Huh? I mean you're queer. I ain't often heard anybody talk like you. You gonna stay in America, ain't you?"

"I will stay here for four years. Then I go back to help my people."

"What's th' matter with 'em?"

"So few are Christians."

"Oh. Say, what's China like?"

"My country is very beautiful, some of it, but in Hong Kong we have none of this pretty snow."

"Gee, that's fine. I hate snow."

"That is strange."

"You won't think it's so pretty when you go sloshin' round in it tomorrow. But I like it in the country. You oughta see the snow up where I usta live when I was a kid. Gee, it's grand. You talk about snow bein' pretty. You oughta see it there, where it don't get all tramped inta dirt."

"It is a small village, your home?"

"Yeh—one o' those little towns where nothin' ever happens except when th' boys go fishin'."

"That is like my home, where I was born. When the fishing is good and the

rice is ripe are all the excitements. But when I left there I was little. Last year my friends took me up there to see it. It is such a tiny village, Shen Tau. There is only the boat landing on the river and the market place."

"I guess all those watertank towns are th' same, anywheres. When you've seen the railroad station at my home you've seen everything, except th' blacksmiths, an' Foster's Emporium.

"But I often think of that little place, so far away, where it is so quiet, and where my mother is buried."

"Yeh, ain't that so? I can remember everything, too, even th' lame old dawg that didn't belong to anybody."

"That little Shen Tau is often in my thoughts, but there is no one there now who would remember me. All my relatives are dead."

"So's mine."

"But I should not sorrow, for by great and wonderful provision of grace, they all died in the Christian faith, and I shall meet them again. But I am mos' anxious that I shall live as my honourable mother would have wished."

"Yeh—" said Miss MacAllister, uncertainly, the colour suddenly rising in her cheeks.

"She would be very happy to know that I am now in this Christian land, of which we talked so many times."

"A Christian—say, kiddo, you're makin' a big mistake there."

The floorwalker came along just then, very erect, very formal, with an impossible part to his hair, and a cravat inhumanly correct and a long frock coat and manicured fingernails. The girls on the floor looked after his figure with

mingled feelings. He was very stern, but severely just, and his pronouncements had the wisdom of Solomon and the discretion of a ward politician, and to bribe him with a sweet smile was utterly impossible. He paused for the fraction of a moment to observe the unusual customer at Miss MacAllister's counter and also to satisfy himself that she was all right, for he had not failed to notice the dark rings under her eyes earlier in the evening, but as he saw her better colour he passed on, his eye as cold as it was possible for a man with the name of O'Hagan to make it.

The Chinese girl had not understood Miss MacAllister's skeptical remark, for Yetta had pinched her vigorously before it was half uttered, and she had hastily covered it with a cough, conscious of sharing Yetta's evident disinclina-

tion to shake the confidence in the new land.

"I will take these things to my friends, for the sur-prise presentation to-morrow," she was saying, "and now I must go. It has been a great pleasure to meet you."

"So long, girlie. Take care of yourself as you're goin' home. Don't let anybody speak t' you."

"Why should I not?"

"Oh—why—say, you ain't wise, are you?"

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

"Huh!"

"Do you not understand that?"

"I dunno what you mean."

"The missionaries tell us to say that to ourselves whenever we fear temporal things, so that we may remember that

there is only one thing to fear. We are so afraid of everything, at first, we Chinese girls, who have been children under my poor country's superstitions. But now many are like me, and fear nothing."

"Why not?"

"Because I am a Christian, as you are."

Miss MacAllister began to laugh, then she flushed even more than she had before, and looked down, then she leaned across the counter and patted the dark face. "You're a little piece of all right, that's what you are, you little bundle of imported goods!" she declared, half way between laughing and crying.

They clasped hands closely, drawn by the sweet magnetism of girlhood.

"Say, what's your name?" Miss MacAllister was hunting for her handkerchief with her other hand.

"It is Wei Loh," answered the little Oriental, "and that means Joy, so do not let me see tears in your eyes. Good-bye, now. I will come back to see you soon. The peace of the Lord be with you."

The quaint salutation fell from the full lips quite naturally, as she smiled and passed on.

Miss MacAllister blew her nose, and glanced consciously at Miss Zabriskie.

"She is lofely," that young lady responded, enthusiastically, ostentatiously ignoring Miss MacAllister's brimming eyes.

"Say—ain't she? Did you hear what she ast me? I never heard that since I was a kid. The deaconess in my mother's church usta ask me that, regular. She usta ask all the kids that, once in so often. She was a nice old girl. Gee, I whist I could go up there to live again.

This town—it's fierce stayin' here, an' —wasn't that funny, how her little home town an' mine's alike? I whist I was goin' to be a doctor or, or somepin'. I tell you one thing, though, Yetta—" she began to pile up the scattered objects on the counter with shaking fingers, but her lips came together in a straight line, "I guess I can go on buttin' my way through the world. I guess I'll let that fella go day-day. Someway, bein' Christmas, an' all—an' what she said about her honourable mother—wasn't that cute?—Why—" the bright drops brimmed over at last, and Yetta Zabriskie, with the volcanic intensity of her Slavic race, threw her arms around her friend and kissed her wet cheek and patted her pretty hair and said a number of soothing sentences in a language which Miss MacAllister understood not at all, but

whose import she comprehended perfectly.

The other salespeople at the distant counters, stacking up their wares and pulling out great shrouding cloths, did not notice the two girls, half hidden behind their own wrapping desk, but the floorwalker did, at once, and he began making a casual but direct progress toward them, while he instructed a cleaner, picking up débris in the aisle, to find out if the nurse was still in the rest-room. Nervous breakdowns at the close of Christmas Eve were not uncommon and Mr. O'Hagan knew that usually they were not serious; nevertheless, anxiety drew his eyebrows together as he stepped quietly up behind the two girls, for a store full of Slavs, Hebrews, Italians and Germans, Miss MacAllister's pale Scotch beauty had stirred his

Irish blood, as has been the way of Scotch and Irish for untold generations. He had never spoken more than a hundred words to the girl, during the two years that they had both worked on the same floor of the big shop, but seldom a day had gone by that he had not spent a profitless half hour just looking at her, from some well-concealed point. Now, as he heard the stifling little sniffs and sobs which Yetta was smothering on a plump little shoulder, the coldness left his eyes and something very fine and good took its place.

"I tell you, Yetta," Miss MacAllister mumbled, "I'm goin' t' write up home to my old school teacher, an' ask her if she can't get me some work there. I'm goin' t' blow outa here—yes, I am. There's nothin' to it. I'd d'ruther go up there an' work for my keep somewheres. I

ain't got anybody that cares a thing for me, an' most of the time I'm half starved —some day that fella or somebody's mean and rich as he is will come along when I'm feelin' blue, an' I tell you, I'm goin'. I can keep soul an' body together up there, anyway, an' maybe I can get back my healt'."

At that moment there arose, all over the city, the muffled clash of bells, softened into weird harmony by the fog and snow. Deep, booming whistles came from the river and the harbor and shriller ones from factories, engines and powerplants. It was Christmas Day. The two girls held each other in a tight embrace, and a murmur ran around the great floor space. Men and women trooped out from behind their counters, and tired little cash girls congregated in a knot near the elevators, and in a few

minutes there was almost no one left on the floor.

Then Mr. O'Hagan put out a shiny finger and touched Miss MacAllister's ruffled frill with something that was like a caress.

"Merry Christmas, Jennie," he said, to the startled girl, "my, you look tired. Run right along and get your things and I'll see you safe home—dear."

And Miss MacAllister, who was "wise," who had resisted the most apparently genuine blandishments, who had as truly lived with sword and shield in hand as any knight of old, Miss MacAllister let Mr. O'Hagan lay his hand gently, possessively around her slender waist, and propel her into the aisle. Miss MacAllister steadied herself by holding on to his coat for a moment, before she turned away, and Mr. O'Hagan smiled after her

until Yetta brushed by him in her single-handed task of "covering up."

"Here, let me help you with that," he said, then, "you look kinda tired, yourself, Yetta. It's a hard week on you girls."

"I guess the week is ending very happy for one girl, Mr. O'Hagan," Yetta answered, smiling up audaciously into the great man's face.

He coloured and grinned sheepishly. "I've bin tryin' to make up my mind to speak to 'er for months, but to-night—well, I heard somethin' of what she said, an' it's being Christmas, an' all, why—"

Reminded of a ceremony neglected, Yetta put out a dark little claw. "Merry Christmas, Mr. O'Hagan," she said.

"The same to you, an' many of 'em, Miss Zabriskie," Mr. O'Hagan responded, earnestly.

V

IN VIRTUE'S ARMOUR

V

IN VIRTUE'S ARMOUR

THOMAS VAN BUREN, last of the name, stood at the door and languidly surveyed the snowy street, a cigarette hanging from his listless fingers. He had spent the evening in various cafés, where he usually found agreeable companions, and, failing there, had turned to his club as a last resort, but it, too, was deserted. All up and down Broadway, that night, the restaurants and the hotels had had a forlorn appearance. The waiters were absent-minded, and the musicians played dreamy old-fashioned music, and the solitary man, eating by himself in a distant corner, dis-

concertingly stared at the empty chair opposite, so that one wondered what phantom of a happier Christmas Eve he saw there.

Thomas had a sneaking notion at the back of his head that most of his boon companions, who prided themselves, during the rest of the year, on being *bon vivants,* Bohemians, good fellows, jolly dogs, and all-around, sophisticated, cynical men of the world, would soon be eating their turkey, cranberry sauce and pie in households which acknowledged them to be none of those things. He knew a good deal about life, did Thomas, which he never acknowledged, even to himself. He knew that the most knowing, the most indifferent, the most dissipated of his friends felt the drag of Christmas upon his heart strings, and for that one day, at least, played the repentent

prodigal, and because he, himself, hadn't and wouldn't, and because there was a queer feeling somewhere in the region of his immaculate waistcoat which he refused to identify, and because he had had more champagne than was good for him, and for a number of other reasons, Mr. Van Buren felt bored and ill at ease and distressingly wakeful, although the din, announcing the arrival of Christmas Day, was just subsiding.

The streets were almost deserted. Back in the rooms of the club they were putting out most of the lights. Mr. Van Buren sighed and swung his cane at a taxicab which had been loitering speculatively at the curb, and came down the steps. There he paused and looked in surprise at the little figure hurrying toward him.

"Really!" exclaimed Mr. Van Buren,

"What does Cathay on Fifth Avenue at the witching hour of midnight?"

Her intention to speak to him was so evident that he removed his hat and advanced a step toward her.

"Sir—" she said, panting a little, "Will you have the great kindness to direct me? I fear I am los'."

"To serve beauty in distress is ever a pleasure. Where do you wish to go?"

"Oh, that is what is mos' diffeecult, sir. I cannod find t'e house."

He shot her a keen glance, interested, but amused, too, and incredulous. Was she really Chinese? He had not known that they were so pretty.

"But you know the address?"

"Sir, I do not. I have forgot the num-ber, and that street."

"Ah—that makes it rather difficult, doesn't it?"

"Oh, mos' difficult. I—I am not afraid, but I am bewild', because of forgetting. I know that it is somewhere in this vicinity, but where I know not. I did not know that it was so late until I heard all those bells.

The little agitation which she had shown was passing away, and even the slight accent with which she had begun to speak had disappeared. She smiled gaily up into Mr. Van Buren's face, and Mr. Van Buren, thoughtfully stroking his moustache, smiled back and decided that kind fate had sent him a most interesting little adventure. His smile was not a good one, but little Wei Loh did not feel that. She had penetrated to the real Thomas, far down in the cool, blasé eyes, and was content to have found a friend. "I am sure you will be able to suggest which way I should do," she

continued, after a moment's pause, in which the man had had time to think thoughts which were afterward to burn him like fire.

"Well," he said, calling the cab and touching the silk sleeve, "I suggest, then, that you get in here with me, and that we drive slowly around until you find this house which is so elusive. Come, now—can't you honestly remember where it was?—On a side street? Or, did you just dream that you had a habitation somewhere? My private opinion is that you are a little Chinese fairy, sent over here expressly for my pleasure this stupid Christmas Eve."

The girl laughed. "I am pretty big for a fairy, I think," she said, gaily. "That street went this way," bisecting the Avenue with her slender finger.

So they began creeping slowly across

town, the motor coughing at the check put on it, and giving the cab little jerks and shakes in its exasperation, and the Chinese girl looked out, and Mr. Van Buren looked at her, feeling extremely uncertain of what he really did think about her and her story, but pleased and excited, and therefore happy.

Miss Wei Loh knew nothing of all that. She liked the Christian gentleman with his pleasant manner and his whimsical smile, and she felt entire confidence in his ability to help her find the house which she had left a good many hours before, as she was beginning to realize.

She was so little and so rosy, so good natured and so free from restraint of manner that the worldly man finally came to the decision that she was far other than she represented herself, for accident and her desire to find her home had kept her

from topics which might have enlightened him. He touched her rounded cheek with his finger, and she only dimpled. He fingered her coat, and asked how long her hair was and what kind of perfume she used, and if she loved pretty jewels, and Wei Loh showed no more uneasiness than if she had been the child that her speech made her seem. So he took up one of her flowerlike hands, critically inspected the almond fingernails and pressed them to his lips.

Despite his assurance, and despite his cynicism and the evil in him, he half drew back as he laid his hand down, expecting he hardly knew what, but by no stretch of his imagination could he have anticipated what she actually did. She laughed. Joyously, chucklingly, she gurgled at him, then promptly sobered as

she met his astonished eyes, gleaming in the dusk of the cab.

"Oh, I mus' surely ask your pardon, sir," she said, trying to pull her face into sober lines, "but that is *so* amusing."

"Amusing!" exclaimed Mr. Van Buren, feeling a most unpleasant shock to his vanity.

"Oh, what mus' you think of me. I am so rude to laugh. I beg you to forgive me, but in Chinese that custom is so—so—"

"Amusing!"

"Yes, sir. We do not do that in China."

"But you—I'll wager you've had it done before!" The hard tone of his voice would have told a good deal to anyone who was listening, but the Chinese girl only chuckled again, as at a gleeful remembrance.

"Oh, yes," she giggled, "many, many times."

"Ah, I thought so!" He said it triumphantly, and yet he was disconcerted and illy at ease with himself, determined to think evil of the adventure, and stirred in some secret recess of his soul as he had not been for many a day.

"I will tell you," she said, alternately looking out of the cab and at him, "our singing master at the school was a Frenchman, a most honourable ol' man, whose white hairs we revered, but that gentleman had that amusing custom. On Fridays, when he bade us goodbye, until Monday—for he did not have classes over the Sabbath—he would kiss the hand of every girl. And to us it seemed so amusing. Many times I have experienced the mos' difficulty in refraining from laughter."

"Well!" Mr. Van Buren remarked.

He was beginning to understand and to feel bitterly ashamed.

"That school was at Hong Kong, sir. I was one of the many orphans of the great flood year, and the good missionaries took me and many others and have educated us."

"Oh," said Mr. Van Buren.

"And they have brought me here to com-plete my training as a physician. We arrived this morning."

"Ah," Mr. Van Buren murmured.

"And I am so happy to be in this dear Christian land," she went on, "and to have that feeling of confidence and understanding toward all whom I meet. In my unhappy country I could never, never have gone about at night as I have done here, but although I am mos' regretful that my dear friends may perhaps be anxious, yet I am sure they

will be tranquil, knowing that everywhere here there are Christians to assist me."

"Um-m-m-ph!" Mr. Van Buren was reduced from monosyllables to inarticulateness.

Seeing that he was not rebuked, the chauffeur, mindful of his complaining engine, had put on a little more speed, and if Mr. Van Buren had not turned away his head, to avoid meeting the gentle and friendly smile of Wei Loh, they might have gone by without seeing a house that had lights in all of its windows, and a general air of alarm, centring in the policeman at the door, to whom several women were excitedly talking. He signaled the cab to stop, and almost before he did so, the little silken bundle beside him had jumped out and had dragged Mr. Van Buren with

her by the simple expedient of clutching his coat and refusing to let go.

Straightway, that still bewildered gentleman found himself the centre of a small feminine whirlwind, Wei Loh explaining where she had been, and how sorry she was, and how kind and in-ter-esting everybody had been and how she should never have found the house but for this very kind and honourable person. Then everybody patted Mr. Van Buren on the back, and shook his hand, and somebody insisted on having his name and address, and then the policeman went away, and Wei Loh was carried up the steps, waving her hand and crying good night and that he must come and see her to-morrow.

Left alone at the curb, then, were Mr. Van Buren and the cab and a grey-haired lady with soft eyes.

"I can only add my thanks to that of the child's," she said, giving him her hand, "she was indeed fortunate in falling into such hands as yours."

Thomas, last of an honourable race, felt so many things so keenly that he was quite unable to answer. He bowed very low to the lady and got into the cab. After a while he saw the chauffeur standing at the door. "Where to, sir?" he asked. "I don't mind standing, but perhaps you wish to go somewhere?"

His fare was so long in replying that the man leaned anxiously in and looked at him; thus urged, Thomas made up his mind suddenly, that mind which had refused to be made up in the right way for a good many years.

He gave an address on the north side of Washington Square and leaned back,

trying to believe that he was very calm, but he could not deny to himself that his hand trembled, and gradually a black mood fell on him, whispering to him that no woman could forgive so much neglect, that no human heart could or would keep on loving when it was misprized, unregarded, treated as of no value. Although he had had time to feel so much the cab had gone only a block or two away from the house where he had left Wei Loh when it stopped. "Some one is calling you, sir, I think," said the chauffeur.

Thomas looked back and saw then several persons were strung out along the sidewalk in the rear, and in front of them, flying along at an odd little run, came a figure that he knew. She came panting up, as he stepped wonderingly out, and held her hand toward him.

"It—must have fallen—out—when I took hold of your coat so rudely," she said, as she caught her breath. "It fell on the steps."

He took his purse from her, not speaking, looking directly into her eyes. There, under the frosty stars, with her fluttering garments, and her glowing eyes and her elfin grace, she seemed like a creature of another world. He looked at her, seeing her truly for the first time, and conscious of that solemn hush of the soul which comes mysteriously upon us when our intuitions warn us of an impending crisis in our lives. He looked at her, without speaking, and Wei Loh, laying her hand in his, turned to go.

"The peace of the Lord be with you," she said.

He stood still until he saw her turn the corner; then he went across the street to

an all-night drug store there and called up a number. A sleepy voice answered him, after a little delay.

"Ask Mrs. Van Buren if she will speak with Mr. Van Buren?" he said.

There was another long wait. The chauffeur, helping himself to a maple sundae at the soda water fountain, observed his fare with more than ordinary interest, as a gentleman likely to have odd adventures. Now he was apparently waiting for a response, impatiently beating his hand against the transmitter; now he was talking, earnestly, now he was listening, every line of his head and shoulders, in the dim booth, betraying a tense and anxious moment. The clerk, following the chauffeur's amused stare, was just in time to see Mr. Van Buren enthusiastically kissing the unresponsive telephone instrument, while he talked, ex-

citedly, into the receiver which he should have held to his ear.

Slowly, they brought their eyes around, encountered each other's amazed faces, and grinned.

"Merry Christmas!" they said.

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